

BALCONY HOUSE



A visit to Balcony House provides an inside look at a classic 13th-century cliff dwelling in Mesa Verde National Park. This is one of the best preserved sites in the park.



To visit Balcony House, you must join a ranger-guided tour. The tour requires moderate physical exertion and a sense of adventure: you'll climb three long ladders; navigate a steep trail with some exposure on cliff faces; and crawl through a narrow 12 foot (3.7 m) long tunnel. Group size is limited, and tours gather at scheduled times at the Balcony House parking area on the Cliff Palace Loop drive. The site is open from May to October. Balcony House is located 6,700 feet (2043 m) above sea level. The trip is not recommended for people with heart or breathing problems or those who are afraid of heights.

The village offers a stunning view down into Soda Canyon, a tributary of the Mancos River, and displays intriguing architectural features: balconies, a long parapet wall, and a tunnel.

The builders of Balcony House are now known as Ancestral Pueblo people. They were farmers who lived and grew crops on the mesa tops until about A.D. 1300. However, beginning about A.D. 1200, many chose to build their homes in cliff-side alcoves. Their lives were filled with hard work but were probably also rich in ritual and ceremony. And while the Ancestral Pueblo people raised turkeys, and stored corn, beans, and squash to last through the long winters, they also had a keen knowledge of the uses of wild plants and animals.

Although Balcony House now feels isolated and remote, in the 13th century it was part of a much larger community. Eleven small sites have been counted in the immediate vicinity, and many significant larger ones are within easy walking distance. Cliff Palace, one of the largest cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, is only about a half mile away.

Architecture

Balcony House is a typical Mesa Verde cliff dwelling: it's a medium-sized two-story masonry structure, which was built about the same time as



The North Plaza of Balcony House features the best preserved balcony and is bordered by an extraordinary parapet wall.

the other cliff dwellings in the park.

The builders used materials available all around them—sandstone, sometimes

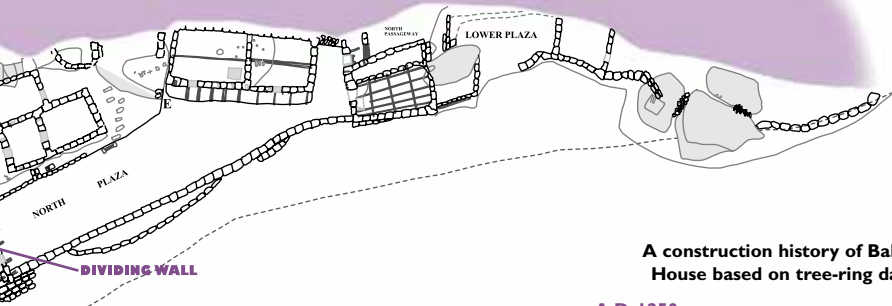
shaped into rectangular blocks and pecked on the surface. The stones were set in wet mortar mixed from tan, sandy soils and smoothed by the people's own hands. Smaller chinking stones were inserted into the mortar, and might have helped level the walls and create tighter joints. Some parts of Balcony House show careful attention to craftsmanship, while in other places the masonry is less meticulous and looks hastily done. Once the walls were built, some surfaces were completely plastered over, hiding the fine rock work. Original plaster, sometimes several layers thick, can still be seen in a few rooms.

Archeologists count 38 rooms and two kivas in Balcony House, and they divide the site into three plazas or courtyards with associated rooms: the Lower Plaza, the North Plaza, and the Kiva Plaza. Significant planning and engineering skills were required to build two deep kivas side by side in the center of the site. Both kivas are examples of the signature Mesa Verde style kiva. Typical characteristics include a 'keyhole' shape, six pilasters, a



BALCONY HOUSE FACTS

- ◆ alcove is 39 feet (12 m) deep and 20 (6 m) feet high
- ◆ complex is 264 feet (80 m) long
- ◆ 38 rooms and 2 kivas
- ◆ built 600 feet (183 m) above Soda Canyon floor
- ◆ constructed intermittently AD 1180 to 1270



A construction history of Balcony House based on tree-ring dating.

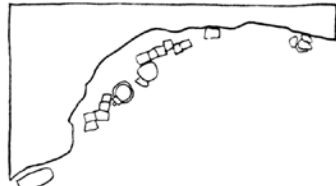
banquette or bench around the interior, a fireplace and ventilator shaft, and the *sipapu* in the floor. Originally the kivas were roofed and a ladder led down through a hole in the roof. Other than the side-by-side kivas, the overall layout of Balcony House was probably determined by the size and shape of the rock alcove.

Balcony House was named for its primary architectural feature, the balconies in the North Plaza. One of the finest examples of balconies in an Ancestral Puebloan site, they remain intact between the first and second stories of the central rooms. The residents used the balconies to move from one second-story room to another, and they may also have used them as work spaces at times. A retaining wall runs along the entire front of the alcove. Fill behind this wall

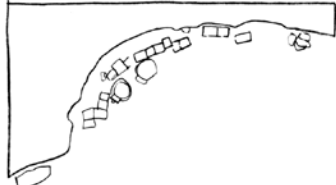
A.D. 1250



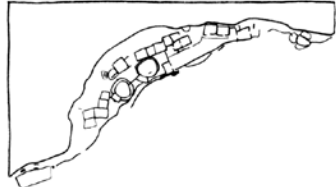
A.D. 1270



A.D. 1275



A.D. 1280



created level surfaces on build to build, and the parapet provided some measure of security for those who lived on the edge of this deep canyon.

Age and Change

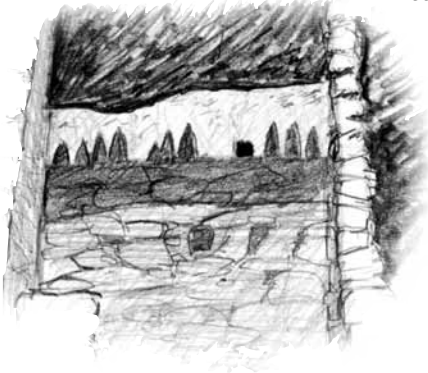
The builders of Balcony House chose mostly juniper wood for roof beams and other supports. This wood is valuable to archeologists because it provides construction dates for the structure. Growth rings in the wood indicate three construction periods. First, from A.D. 1180 to about 1220, residents built a block of rooms toward the back of the alcove and possibly a kiva. None of these early structures still stand; the rooms we see today were

constructed in the next two phases: the A.D. 1240s and later in the A.D. 1270s.

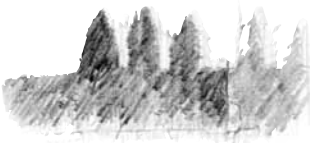
The major construction in the A.D. 1240s took place in the middle of the site. More roomblocks were added, likely replacing the earlier rooms, which may have fallen into disrepair. This is also when the retaining wall and the pair of kivas seen today were constructed.

In the A.D. 1270s, more changes were made. The retaining wall was extended further north, rooms were added, the passageways were defined, and the north plaza parapet was constructed. Four rooms were constructed in the central portion of the site, resulting in the plaza division we see today. Some archeologists suggest that this construction may have marked off a ceremonial space that became more important in the late A.D. 1200s.

By A.D. 1300, most of the people who had lived in Balcony House and the neighboring villages had moved on. Insights into their decisions to move away come from numerous sources. The tree ring record shows a long drought at the end of the A.D. 1200s, when crops



This common Mesa Verde design can be seen in a room in the Kiva Plaza.



would have shriveled and springs would have dried up. The numbers of sites and artifacts indicate that populations had been on the rise for generations. Evidence from ancient trash middens implies that people were eating fewer large animals and more small animals at that time. Some archeologists find evidence for increasing social conflict, perhaps as environmental pressures grew.

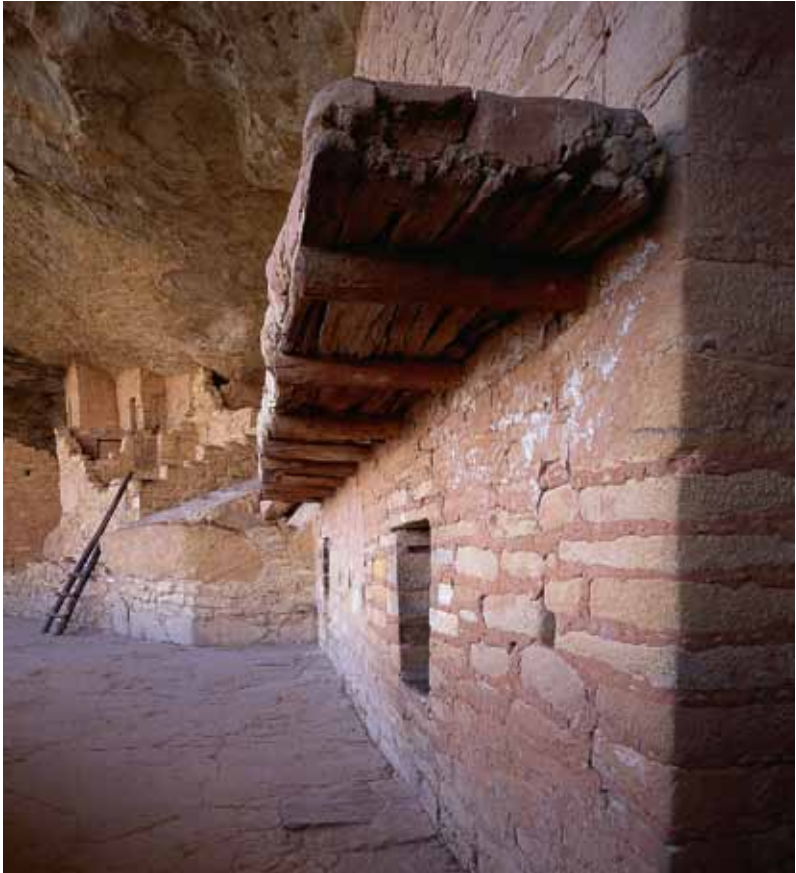
Whatever the combination of environmental and social stresses that led them to leave this area, they took many of their traditions, architectural skills, and artistic styles to their new homes. By all evidence, their descendants are the modern pueblo peoples of the Hopi villages in northern Arizona, and the peoples of Zuni, Acoma, Laguna, and the Rio Grande pueblos of New Mexico and Texas. For many of today's pueblo people, Balcony House and Mesa Verde are special places, the homes of their ancestors.



This tunnel was originally the only access to Balcony House.



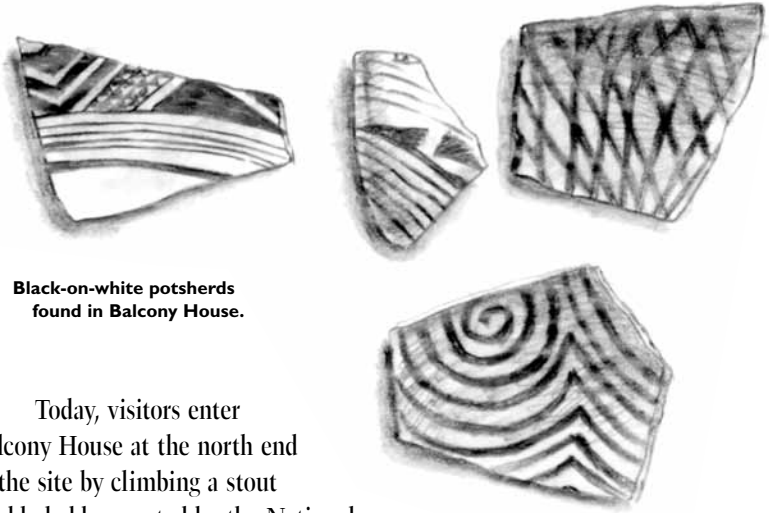
Behind the dwelling rooms the cool, damp alcove shelters a reliable spring.



Balconies permitted the residents to pass from one second-story room to another.

Village Details

Look for the wood beams extending into the North Plaza. These may have been balcony supports. In a room nearby, wooden beams span the walls near the ceiling. These may have been drying racks for corn or other produce. In a room in the Kiva Plaza, a design was painted on a wall: a band with three triangles above. This is a fairly common design in Mesa Verde, but we can only guess what it represented or symbolized to the people who lived here.



**Black-on-white potsherds
found in Balcony House.**

Today, visitors enter Balcony House at the north end of the site by climbing a stout double ladder erected by the National Park Service in the 1930s. The original residents of Balcony House entered at the other end of the alcove, aided by hand- and toe-hold trails notched into the cliff. Then they passed through the 12 foot (3 m) roofed tunnel by which visitors now leave the site. As an entryway, this tunnel would have allowed only to those who were known and welcome to enter. It and other restrictive passageways were built in the last phase of construction at Balcony House.

Water was an important attribute of this alcove. A spring at the back of the alcove was probably the main water source for the residents. They must have spent a good deal of time in this cool, damp area, judging by the amount of black fire soot on the alcove walls. The unique, late architectural features of Balcony House, such as the tunnel, might have been constructed to protect this domestic water supply.

A small pottery jar was found buried near the spring. Inside was a cache of dried roots, a skin pouch, cotton cloth, mosaic discs, and turquoise and shell beads. Other artifacts found in Balcony House include pieces of black-on-white pottery; knives, scrapers, and awls made of bone and stone; baskets and cords; feather cloth; and a collection of manos and metates, used to grind meal by hand. A stone pendant, carved wooden sticks, and a possible altar stone or ceremonial hoe may have been especially important to their owners.

Excavation & Stabilization



Virginia McClurg, an advocate for national park protection for Mesa Verde

For more than five centuries, the villages at Mesa Verde were empty and silent. Then, in the late 1800s, Anglo-Americans started to hear about the wonders of the mesa and began entering sites on their own. In 1884, local prospector and judge W.H. Hayes and prospector S.E. Osborn etched their names on rocks in Balcony House and other nearby sites. Also visiting in the 1880s was Virginia McClurg, who later became a leader in the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association. This women's group worked to gain national park protection for Mesa Verde. In later years, the association was instrumental in raising money to have Balcony House excavated and stabilized. Members of the well-known Wetherill family, ranchers from nearby Mancos, visited the site during these years, and the site was named by Al Wetherill in 1885.

Kiva Plaza, as seen in 1908, was restored in 1910 and remains in excellent condition today (opposite page).



Scientific work first began with Gustaf Nordenskiöld, who came to Mesa Verde in 1891. He entered Balcony House “by a break-neck climb” and described it in his now-famous book *The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde*.



Gustaf Nordenskiöld photograph of Balcony House, 1891.

Of the many sites he investigated, he declared Balcony House “the best preserved of all the ruins on the Mesa Verde.” Nordenskiöld incised “No. 10” into the cliff face in Kiva Plaza, using his own numbering system. He also suggested the structure was in a good position for defense: “A handful of men, posted in this cliff-house, could repel the attacks of a numerous force,” he wrote. Nordenskiöld was the first to publish a description of the site and the name “Balcony House.”



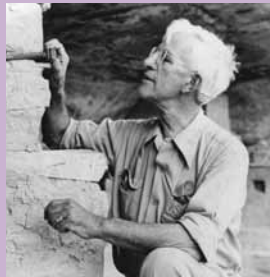




Jesse Nusbaum, his father Edward M. Nusbaum, and his crew of eight to ten men spent six weeks in the fall of 1910 cleaning and stabilizing Balcony House. They completely reconstructed the collapsed parapet wall in front of Kiva Plaza and repaired major cracks in other walls. Most of their work was done well and is still in place today, but some of their methods are now considered controversial. Although he recognized that the use of modern metal might be out of place in Balcony House, Nusbaum decided that the best way to support walls while working on the base course was to install angle irons, tie rods, and turnbuckles. Visitors to Balcony House today can still see those additions.

OPPOSITE

Jesse Nusbaum applying adobe mud to iron bracing, 1910.



THIS PAGE

Nusbaum's crew working in Kiva A.

In 1965, Nusbaum returned to inspect his earlier work.

On-site blacksmithing fashioned iron braces used in the stabilization.

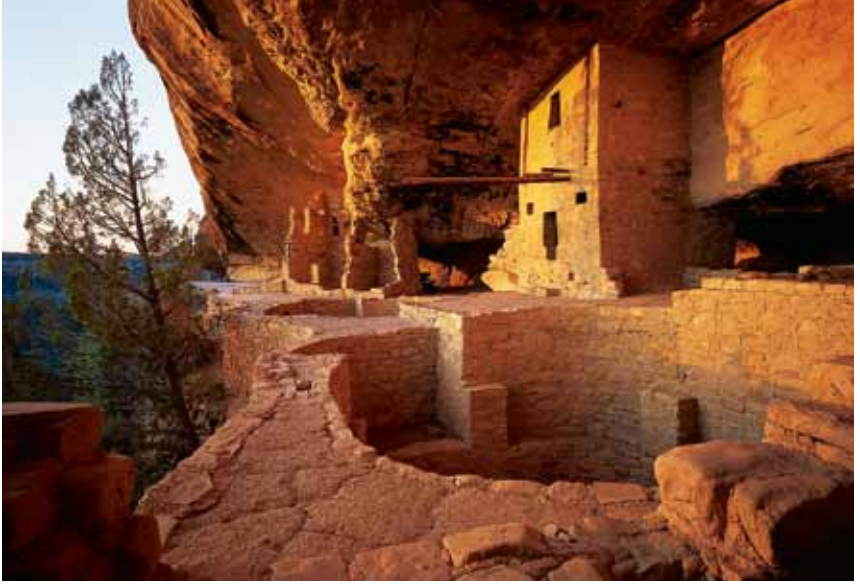


Mesa Verde visitors often wonder whether the stonework in the cliff dwellings is original. One reason they're uncertain is because the stabilization crews have been so adept at making their modern repairs match the 800-year-old masonry. Stabilization work to prevent deterioration at sites like Balcony House began in the 1930s and continue to this day.

The first systematic excavation and repair work in Balcony House took place in the autumn of 1910, four years after Mesa Verde National Park was designated. Work was supervised by a twenty-three year old Coloradan named Jesse Nusbaum, with significant help from his father, who was a building contractor in Greeley, Colorado. Nusbaum was highly skilled in photography. In 1907, he trained under E.C Hewitt of the Archeological Institute of America, and began a noted career in archeology. He later became superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park, serving intermittently from 1921 to 1946.

Rough conditions were the order of the day for Nusbaum and his work crew. All supplies had to be brought in by pack animals. They lived in tents, exposed to rain, snow, and freezing temperatures. Nusbaum finished work in Balcony House just as heavy, deep snows prevented supplies from being packed in.





View south over Kiva Plaza.

For modern visitors, the excellent state of preservation is one of Balcony House's finest qualities. We can thank the dry protected conditions of the alcove, and the National Park Service's century-long efforts to stabilize and maintain the site. After more than ten years "thinking about, examining, and admiring Balcony House," Mesa Verde archeologist Kathleen Fiero concluded that "the more one knows about this fairly modest site, the more intriguing it becomes." With careful stewardship, the wooden beams, plastered walls, and fine masonry of Balcony House may still reveal facets of the lives of the Pueblo people who last inhabited Mesa Verde.

Preservation and monitoring at Balcony House continues today. About 1930, the National Park Service built a cistern to contain the spring at the back of the alcove and drain water away from the kivas. Park crews still work at the site, protecting the floors and walls from the effects of normal weathering and movement, and the thousands of curious visitors who enter Balcony House each year.

To Our Visitors

Mesa Verde National Park offers a spectacular look into the lives of the Ancestral Pueblo people who made this land their home for over 700 years. Today, the park protects over 4,500 known archeological sites, including 600 cliff dwellings. These are some of the most notable and best preserved in the United States. Please do your part to protect them for all to visit and enjoy.

Most of the sites you see at Mesa Verde are over 750 years old.

- Please do not touch, sit, stand, or lean on their fragile walls.
- Since archeologists need to see everything in context to understand a site, do not disturb artifacts. Removing them is illegal.

Treat cliff dwellings and other archeological sites as you would a museum.

- No smoking or eating is permitted in the sites.
- Do carry and drink water.
- Only leashed service animals are allowed in sites or on trails.

Always stay on marked trails.

- Since people may be on trails below you, do not throw rocks or other objects into the canyons.
- Remember that the park is at a higher elevation than you may be used to; move slowly and drink plenty of water.
- If you have heart or respiratory conditions, be especially careful of your health.

We appreciate your help in preserving these priceless treasures for future generations.



Written by Rose Houk. Special thanks to Patricia Lacey and Kay Barnett.

This publication is produced by the Mesa Verde Museum Association in cooperation with Mesa Verde National Park, a World Cultural Heritage Site.

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