

# Blackfoot Cave

## & The Archaeology of the Palmer Divide

American Indians have been living in what is now Colorado for over 13,000 years. Over time, people returned to familiar places that they knew offered access to vital resources such as food, shelter, and water. Blackfoot Cave is one such place, with its reliable water source, spacious shelter, and abundance of edible plants and wild game. Over many millennia, these key resources repeatedly drew people back to Blackfoot Cave. American Indians

first occupied the site about 5000 years ago. The most intensive occupation likely took place between 1800 and 800 years ago. During the 1800s, mountain men, miners, and early Colorado settlers were drawn to the site's reliable water and shelter. The story of Blackfoot Cave is known through archaeological data, oral histories, and historical records. Archaeologists studied the site for eight years beginning in 2007.

### Middle Archaic Period: 3600-2800 B.C.

The first major occupation at Blackfoot Cave occurred during a period archaeologists call the Middle Archaic. During this period, people harvested a wide variety of wild plants and animals. They also stayed longer than their ancestors had at camps like Blackfoot Cave. With its reliable spring and sheltering cliff, Blackfoot Cave would have been an ideal place for people to live for several weeks or even months.



Grinding slabs were important tools for Middle Archaic people. (Courtesy of Douglas County History Repository.)

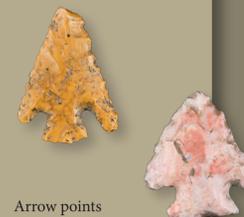
Although people had been harvesting wild plants for millennia, another major hallmark of the Middle Archaic is the increasing dietary importance of plant resources. Grinding slabs, such as this one discovered by archaeologists at Blackfoot Cave, were used to prepare seeds, berries, and other foods for cooking. Many edible wild plants are found near Blackfoot Cave, including goosefoot (*Chenopodium*).



Burned goosefoot seeds were recovered from Blackfoot Cave, showing that native people used them as a food source.

### Ceramic Period: 200-1200 A.D.

The next major occupation of Blackfoot Cave began during the Early Ceramic, a time of technological change that witnessed the replacement of the throwing-stick (atlatl) by the bow in hunting tool kits, as well as the first use of pottery vessels. The bow and arrow may have increased hunting efficiency, allowing hunters to work in smaller groups. Pottery changed the kinds of foods people ate and how they prepared them. Pottery and the bow and arrow may have helped people extend their stay at sites like Blackfoot Cave.



Arrow points from Blackfoot Cave dating to the Early Ceramic period. (Courtesy of Douglas County History Repository.)



Modern replica of an Early Ceramic cooking pot. (Courtesy of cherylenecaver.com)

Archaeologists recovered many projectile points from Blackfoot Cave, including the arrow points shown here. Cooking pots similar to the modern replica seen here were also recovered. These pots would have been used for cooking and storage, rather than as serving pieces. Both of these technologies persisted until trappers and traders introduced metal arrows and pots.

### Settler Period: 1840s-1960s A.D.

The first written description of Blackfoot Cave was composed by Rufus Sage, a journalist who followed the Trapper's Trail from Fort Lupton to Taos in 1842. The site was also described by miners bound for the California gold rush on a nearby wagon route known as the Cherokee Trail.



Miners pan for gold near Denver. (History Colorado, Accession number 90.152.612.)



Photo of the Gottlieb Schreiber home ca. 1930, later the Muller Ranch [Cherry Valley-Spring Valley Historical Society Photo Grant Collection; 2003.046.016.0164]. (Courtesy of the Douglas County Library Archives and Local History.)

In 1894, the Schreiber family—drawn like so many before them to the site's reliable water—established a homestead at Blackfoot Cave. Farming and ranching continued at the site until the 1960s. The foundations of several buildings, like the summer kitchen, can still be seen today.

### Timeline of Major Blackfoot Cave Occupations

The colored bars on the timeline represent the three major cultural occupations at the site. What were some of the driving forces that led people back to the site over time?

