

## Preserving the Painted Desert Inn in Petrified Forest National Park

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Painted Desert Inn (Figure 1) is the architectural centerpiece of Petrified Forest National Park. Its history and architectural significance is integral to the cultural interpretation of the park and greatly enhances the visitor's experience. Nevertheless, Painted Desert Inn suffers from structural deterioration caused by bentonite clay, which produces severe expansion and contraction, resulting in numerous physical challenges. This essay shall summarize the history and development of Painted Desert Inn and how its architectural design enhances interpretation and the visitor experience. The threats and challenges facing Painted Desert Inn will then be elaborated upon, followed by a brief discussion of current treatments.



**Figure 1.** Painted Desert Inn, Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona.

Petrified Forest, located in northeastern Arizona, was initially established as a national monument in 1906 under the Antiquities Act to protect and preserve petrified wood deposits in what is now the south end of the park. The monument was greatly expanded in the 1930s, and then re-established as a national park in 1962.

The story of Painted Desert Inn begins in 1924 when Herbert Lore constructed what he called the “Stone Tree House.” It was called this because he constructed it of petrified wood. Lore provided food, lodging, and curio sales for visitors to the Painted Desert region, many of whom he personally transported from the nearby railroad stop in Adamana.

Additional visitors reached Painted Desert Inn from Route 66, which passed just to the south. In 1931, Lore constructed another road from the Rio Puerco Bridge near Adamana to the Painted Desert Inn, offering an additional way for visitors to reach his property.

As early as 1931, the National Park Service (NPS) considered expanding what was then Petrified Forest National Monument to encompass the Painted Desert area and thereby acquire the Stone Tree House. In 1932, NPS purchased 53,300 acres of the Painted Desert, which did not include Lore's property. Then in 1936, NPS purchased an additional 2,500 acres from Lore, including the Stone Tree House and related improvements. At that time, the Painted Desert Inn was closed and Lore departed (Livingston 1994:7-8).

As part of its planning effort for the Painted Desert region, NPS solicited Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) labor to expand and improve the Stone Tree House. This project began in 1937 and lasted until 1940, greatly expanding the building's size and incorporating various details, including carved corbels, carved wooden furniture, and stamped tinware fixtures. With completion of all these improvements in 1940, the building was reopened as the Painted Desert Inn.

In 1940, Standard Concessions, Inc., entered into a three-year contract with NPS for concession services at the newly completed Painted Desert Inn. Standard Concessions, under the direction of Edward McGrath, continued to operate the Painted Desert Inn until 1947, except for a brief hiatus during World War II.

As early as May 1947, the Fred Harvey Company expressed interest in taking over the Painted Desert Inn concession contract, which they successfully negotiated in July 1947. In October of that same year, the Fred Harvey Company announced that their designer/architect, Mary Jane Colter, would renovate the interior of the Painted Desert Inn. It was closed between November and January for this purpose, and further improvements were conducted during the summer of 1948. Colter's redesign plan included new

paint and plaster, an improved lunch counter, and additional architectural details.

Colter's design for Painted Desert Inn also included interior murals, for which she hired Fred Kabotie, a Hopi Indian artist she had previously worked with for her design of the Watchtower at Grand Canyon. Colter hired Kabotie to paint two murals in the Painted Desert Inn's lunch room and three in the dining room. The largest mural depicts Kabotie's interpretation of the Hopi legend regarding ceremonial salt gathering.

The Fred Harvey Company continued to operate the Painted Desert Inn until 1963, when the company moved its operation to the new Painted Desert Community Complex, which is located three-miles to the south of the inn. As a result, the inn was closed and remained so for ten years.

By the early 1970s, the building had been abandoned for so long that it was thought of as an eyesore. As a result, the Painted Desert Inn was slated for demolition in 1975. Thankfully, public outcry and administrative actions prevented this outcome, and the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in August 1975. Later, the building was included in the *Architecture in the Parks Theme Study* and thereby listed as a national historic landmark in 1987.

Since the building was listed on the National Register and NPS was now "obligated" to keep and maintain the building, the park made some cosmetic improvements and reopened the building as their Bicentennial Travel Center in 1975-1976. The building continued to serve as a seasonal operation from 1976 until 1991, and with a few further improvements and the cooperative interest of the Petrified Forest Museum Association, the building was opened to the public year-round in 1992, and it remains so today.

Historically, the building served as a visitor contact station; concession sales, food, and lodging facility; and as a museum. During the Fred Harvey era, the building was essentially divided, with the company operating one side as a food, sales, and lodging facility, while NPS managed an information desk and museum on the other. In fact, there were two separate

entrances for these different uses, although each could be accessed from the interior. Unfortunately, staffing limitations prevented NPS from maintaining a presence in the so-called “Ranger Room” year-round.

As a result of varying needs and functions, some of the historic uses have changed. Today, the building serves as a visitor contact, museum, and sales area. Interpretive tours are held daily, museum objects and exhibits are displayed throughout the building, and the cooperating association, the Petrified Forest Museum Association, maintains a book and small souvenir sales area.

Museum objects contained within Painted Desert Inn include historic furnishings constructed by the CCC, Kabotie murals, glass ceiling tiles with Indian motifs, and stamped tinware fixtures and features designed by the CCC. When dealing with museum collections in historic buildings, such as Painted Desert Inn, three important elements must be addressed: interpretation, security, and outreach education.

In the comprehensive interpretive plan for Petrified Forest, Painted Desert Inn is defined as a “cultural interpretation location” where the cultural and social history of the park and the inn are interpreted and discussed. Exhibits and interpretive programs at the inn focus on the cultural history of Petrified Forest National Park, especially that of the inn. In addition, there are several display cases that feature archeological and historic objects, including some specific to the inn and others related to the CCC. Thus, Painted Desert Inn contributes to the overall interpretive mission of the park.

Because of these museum objects, Painted Desert Inn’s lack of security is a cause for concern. In preparation for the bicentennial and related displays in 1976, iron security bars were installed on all of the windows and doors, and this is still the only significant security measure in place. However, all display cabinets are locked and historic furnishings are corded off.

Outreach is chiefly accomplished through publications, and in the primary literature for Petrified Forest, titled *Story Behind the*

*Scenery*, Painted Desert Inn and its museum elements are highlighted. Petrified Forest Museum Association also plans to publish a book specifically on the inn, while additional publications have featured the Kabotie murals. In fact, some visitors come to Painted Desert Inn specifically to see these murals, and the Museum of Northern Arizona is currently considering the Kabotie murals for inclusion in a traveling exhibit they are developing on the southwestern mural tradition.

The very nature of Painted Desert Inn influences the interpretation and use of this structure. It is a unique building with attractive features that visitors are drawn to when traveling through Petrified Forest National Park. The inn’s architectural design enhances interpretation in three ways:

The *visitor experience* is deeply influenced by the Spanish Revival style of the building, which draws people to the structure because it is unique and aesthetically appealing. Similarly, visitors are attracted to the building because of its location. It rests on the edge of the Painted Desert with 180 degrees of breathtaking vistas. Once attracted to the building, the architectural design carries visitors in a dynamic circulation pattern that allows them to move in and out of the structure and its interior spaces, each of which presents new views and new experiences. For example, when the Fred Harvey Company occupied the building, guests would move in and out of the structure to gain different services. The architectural features of this building also influence the visitor experience. The carved corbels, glass ceiling tiles, stamped tinware, viewing terraces, open vistas, and outer courtyards all lend themselves to a pleasurable and unique visitor experience.

Painted Desert Inn serves as a *visitor contact* area, where many questions are asked, not the least of which are those regarding the building and its present condition. It is not unusual for visitors to ask if the building is really “safe” for occupancy, and they accusingly ask why NPS has not taken better care of the property. Other questions pertain to the use of the building. Visitors ask if lodge rooms are still available, if the building will ever be

returned to an inn, and if food service is still available. None of these things are available.

*Interpretive tours* of Painted Desert Inn are held daily. Tours typically focus on the human and social history of the building and the region, but naturally such discussions must also include comments regarding the building's architectural history. Interpreters will often take this opportunity to discuss the Recreation Fee Demo program and how it will contribute to the restoration of the inn. Tours have also focused on the Kaboutie murals and related tourism and travel themes. Once a year, a special Harvey Girl interpretive program is hosted by the "Winslow Harvey Girls" who dress up in Harvey uniforms and greet visitors. Various other special events have occurred at the Painted Desert Inn over the years, including events during Founders Day, National Park Service Week, and National Archeology Month. Historically, traveling exhibits were also featured at Painted Desert Inn, and special events for park personnel are periodically held there. Since the 1940s, the local constituency has lovingly referred to the inn as the "pink palace," where they used to hold social events and similar community gatherings.

Painted Desert Inn presents many challenges for park managers. As is quite common for the area, the building was constructed on a vein of bentonite clay, which has a very high expansion and contraction rate, and due to this subsurface movement, the building also moves and flexes, causing impressive and somewhat disconcerting expansion cracks. Since the building serves as a museum space, there are also environmental concerns because historic furnishings and artifacts are subject to extreme changes in temperature and humidity. Whenever it rains, the roof leaks, causing severe water damage to the interior plaster and finishes. Rodent infestation is also of concern. A few rodents may carry hantavirus, a serious medical threat to those who encounter rodent feces in enclosed spaces, although there has never been a reported case of hantavirus contamination within Petrified Forest National Park. Accessibility presents another challenge. As designed, there is no way to enter the

building without navigating stairs, which presents a significant obstacle for visitors who are physically challenged. The proper use of the inn's interior spaces is currently being debated. Since it was originally designed to provide food and lodging, it is difficult to determine the proper use for this structure without providing or at least acknowledging the concessionaire history, but we must also consider the impact a food service operation may have on museum objects and architectural features that are openly displayed. With all of these physical conditions, it becomes a challenge to provide an enjoyable visitor experience.

In an effort to rectify or at least treat some of these challenges and conditions, several measures have been taken. Cracks are monitored on a monthly basis, and this information is stored in a database that records lateral movement. The temperature and humidity of the interior is also measured and recorded by a datalogger every two hours. This information is stored in a similar database. Because of the hantavirus threat, rodents are monitored and trapped. Many of the trapped rodents are then given to a wildlife biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). When it rains, buckets are placed throughout the building to catch leaks, but unfortunately, the worst leaks are at the perimeter or even inside the walls, making leak capture very difficult. Beginning in the spring of 2003, the roof will finally be replaced, which should fix many of our water infiltration problems. In an attempt to stem the tide of deterioration, the murals were restored in 1977 after cracks and time had damaged many of them. Sometime within the next few years, we will once again embark on a mural restoration campaign to repair some of the damage that has occurred since 1977. We are also slated for a substantial line-item construction project to completely restore Painted Desert Inn, but it was dropped from the 2002 and 2003 budgets. We are hopeful Congress will make the money available to us in 2004.

The challenges at Painted Desert Inn are great, and, as is the case in most parks, our resources are few. Since the park first acquired the property in 1936, the concessionaires and

NPS have spent a lot of time and money on the building's upkeep and maintenance. Unfortunately, because it was constructed on bentonite clay the building moves and will continue to move for the rest of its maintainable life. Extensive reports and investigations of the structure and its subsurface conditions have been conducted, but there is very little that can be done to rectify this innate condition. In fact, several other buildings in the park suffer this same fate.

Though the challenges are great, the private and public support of Painted Desert Inn has been a saving grace. If it were not for private interests, the inn would have been demolished in the 1970s. It is a wonderful addition to Petrified Forest National Park and a great resource for the American public. It tells the story of exploration and early tourism devel-

opment; it relates to Route 66, the "mother road"; and it was one of the last projects Mary Colter ever did for the Fred Harvey Company. Its rich history and unique architectural treatment, as well as its problems, lend a great deal to the history of the park. We have made a lot of effort to turn the building's challenges into an asset for resource management and interpretation. We can learn from these experiences and pass this information on to other parks and to the public at large.

### Reference

Livingston, Dewey, et. al. 1994. *Historic Structure Report: Painted Desert Inn, Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona*. Denver: National Park Service, Denver Service Center.

