

# HOPI COLONIZATION ON THE COLORADO RIVER\*

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The Hopi Indians of northeastern Arizona occupy one of the most picturesque portions of the country, but one which is notably poor in agricultural potential. In spite of the severe environmental limitations imposed on them, this small group of Indians has continually occupied the area for over a millenium, deriving the major portion of their subsistence from agriculture. While periods of drought and disorder have occasionally resulted in sizeable fluctuations in the total population of the tribe, most data indicate that it has remained remarkably stable at between two and three thousand, at least during the historical period.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, when contacts with American culture became more common, the population declined slightly, largely as the result of a series of smallpox epidemics. However, since about 1900 the population has been increasing at a rapid rate, reaching a level of 3,444 by 1940, and well over 5,000 by 1960. Because of the limited nature of the agricultural potential such a rapid increase in the population would have caused a severe dislocation in the allocation of resources if measures had not been taken to modify the economic structure of the society. The Hopi had traditionally been subsistence farmers, and as a result, the Bureau of Indian Affairs expected that the proper response to growing population pressure lay in modifying the agricultural system.

Since cultivable land and available water are limited on the Hopi reservation, alternate locations for Hopi farming were sought. Interest soon focused on the Colorado River Indian Reservation near Blythe, California. This reservation (Figure 1) had been established in 1865 "for the Indians of said river and its tributaries." The wording of the act of Congress establishing the reservation was rather vague as to the groups of Indians for which it was intended, but those placed there were largely Mohave Indians, who traditionally lived in that area.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century several irrigation projects were built in the northern portion of the reservation, leading to the development of commercial agriculture for the Indians on the reservation. The southern portion was unused, and there were several attempts to open this land to settlement by non-Indians, but all such efforts failed. Therefore, this land was still under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and largely unoccupied when population problems on other reserva-

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\* The author wishes to acknowledge his debt to the many employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs who contributed their time and interest to provide much of the material included in this study. My thanks particularly to Mr. Victor Swaziek of the Bureau of Indian Affairs area office in Phoenix, Arizona, and Mr. Roy Track of the Colorado River Indian Agency, Parker, Arizona. My thanks also to the many residents of the Hopi and Colorado River Indian reservations who made the field work both pleasant and fruitful.

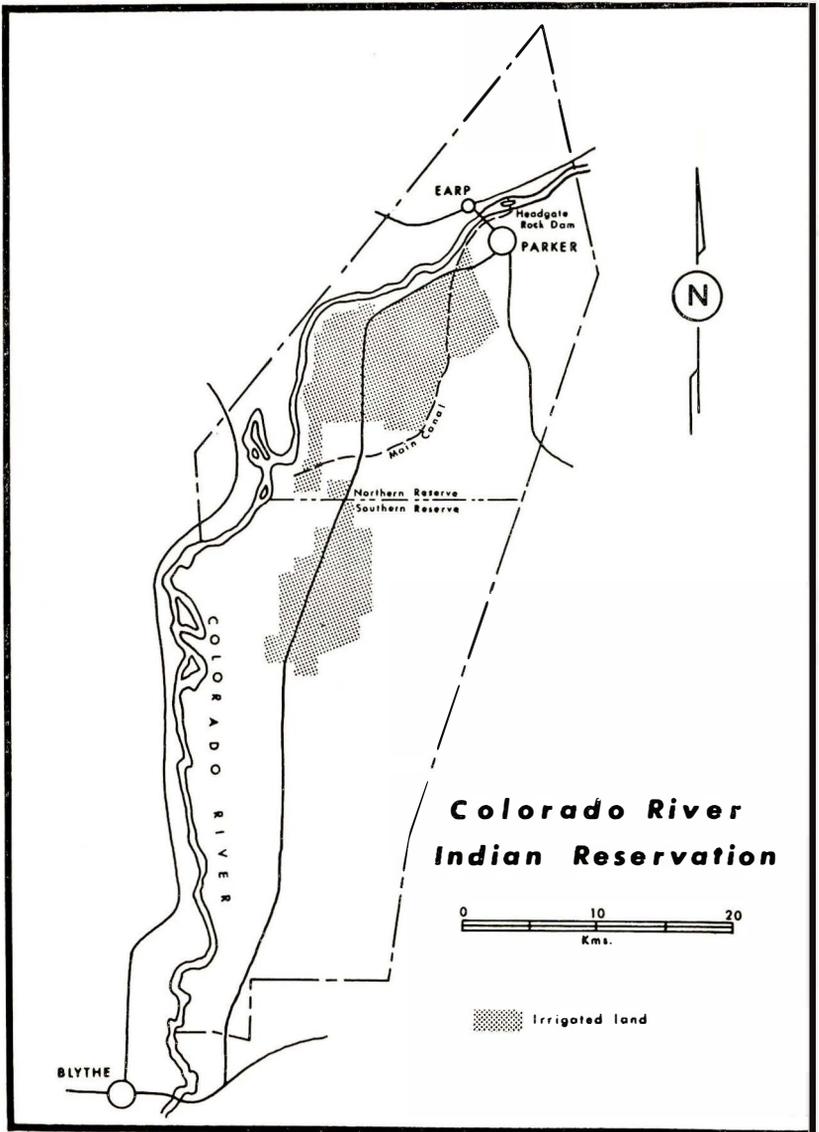


Figure 1

tions became critical. In the late 1930's, when the problems of the Hopi and other southwestern tribes were becoming acute, the Colorado River Indian Reservation contained large tracts of fertile river bottom land which were almost totally unutilized.

The Colorado River Indian Reservation has an area of about 415 square miles and lies along the Colorado River between Parker, Arizona, and Blythe, California. The bulk of the reservation is within Arizona, although a small portion in the north is on the California side of the river. Two clearly distinct physical types are included in the reservation. One, generally along the eastern margin, is made up of the foothills of a series of basin-and-range mountains, with rough, irregular slopes of bare rock or with thin, rocky soil, broken by sandy arroyos, all with a sparse vegetation cover characteristic of the lower Sonoran life zone. The second lies along the Colorado River itself, and is essentially the rivers' floodplain. This area, which varies from two to seven miles in width, lies approximately at river level, and is made up of rich alluvial deposits. In its natural condition it is covered with a dense thicket of scrub vegetation. Some areas are poorly drained, and in many places near the river there is considerable evidence of old stream channels, such as sloughs and meander scars. Rainfall in the area is low (5.07 inches annually) and summer temperatures are often well in excess of 100°F. so that irrigation is necessary for agriculture to be successful.

In 1940 the population of the reservation (excluding the city of Parker, which is non-Indian) was only 1,187, all living in the northern part of the reservation where irrigation canals had been developed. Most of the population were Mohave Indians (875) with the balance being closely related Chemchuevis (312) who had been displaced from their reservation just upstream by the creation of Lake Havasu behind Parker Dam (Young, 1961, p. 200). The Bureau of Indian Affairs estimated that this population could be easily supported by an irrigated area of only 25,000 acres leaving a large portion of the reservation to be developed for other groups.

Use of the reservation by tribes other than those in residence was based on a broad interpretation of the wording of the original act creating the reservation, although it is doubtful that this reflected the intent of Congress in 1865.

Whatever the intent, plans were drawn for the settlement of groups from the Navajo, Hopi, Papago, and Yuma reservations, and certain other Pueblo groups. With the advent of World War II all such plans were suspended, and the unused southern portion of the reservation was turned over for use as a Japanese relocation camp.

At the end of the war the plans were revived, although many of the tribes previously listed were excluded. In 1945, the Colorado River Tribal Council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs entered into an agreement (known as Ordinance No. 5) which provided for the division of the reservation into two parts: the Northern Reserve, containing about 25,000 acres of irrigable land for the use of the Mohave and Chemehuevi residents of the reservation, and the Southern Reserve, containing about 75,000 acres

of irrigable land, which would be opened for colonization. The Bureau agreed to subjugate some 15,000 acres in each reserve. The new land, together with some 12,500 acres already irrigated was thought to be sufficient to adequately support the resident population.

In order to provide a legal basis for the land holdings of the colonists (in the form of perpetual assignments, with title remaining with the tribe) it was agreed that the colonists would be required to become members of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (the legal tribal entity on the reservation).

This provision discouraged many potential colonists, since to do so they would have to give up all the rights and privileges as members of their original tribe. Few were willing to do so, particularly after the Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946 raised the possibility of large payments to tribal members for land seized by the government in the past.

In spite of these difficulties, the first colonists arrived in June of 1945, and by the end of the year sixteen Hopi families and one Navajo family were living on the Southern Reserve, housed initially in the buildings left from the internment camp. During the next few years more colonists arrived, although the total was far below that which had been expected. By the end of the program, 116 Navajo families, thirty-two<sup>1</sup> Hopi families, and three Supai families had moved onto the Southern Reserve. Some of the reasons for the relative ineffectiveness of the program are tied to a series of disagreements between the Colorado River Indian Tribal Council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, outlined below.

By 1949 the Colorado River Tribal Council, made up of Mohaves and Chemehuevis, had decided that Ordinance No. 5 had been a mistake on their part, and in 1951 acted to rescind the agreement. This action was overturned by the Secretary of the Interior, however, leaving the agreement in force. In 1952 a referendum was held on the reservation to modify the terms of the agreement, protecting the interests of the Mohave and Chemehuevi. Legal opinions held the referendum to be invalid however, and the matter was placed in the hands of the courts. In 1954 it was ruled that the reservation was held in trust by the United States for all tribes of the Colorado River and its tributaries, in effect, upholding Ordinance No. 5 and the Bureau of Indian Affairs colonization program (Young, 1961, p. 203).

But as a result of the litigation, colonization efforts were halted, and no more colonists arrived after 1951 (Table 1). Some of the colonists had already returned to their original reservations by that time, and others left during the next several years. Table 1 contains data on departures through 1960, by which time the colonist population seems to have stabilized.

There are some interesting contrasts in the behavior of the two principal groups of colonists. Nearly two-thirds of the Hopi colonists remained on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, and of those who left, nearly half departed almost immediately after arriving. Of the Navajo, nearly two-

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<sup>1</sup> Table 1, taken from Young (1961, p. 205) lists the total number of Hopi families as twenty-nine. The above figure is taken from data provided by the personnel of the Colorado River Indian Reservation Agency at Parker, Arizona. The reason for the discrepancy is unknown.

thirds of the colonists returned to the Navajo reservation, but in most cases, after a period of several years. The largest number of departures came in 1953 and 1955, several years after colonizing efforts had ceased. The two groups also behaved differently with regard to changing their tribal affiliation. The Hopi, for the most part, were adopted into the Colorado River Indian Tribe soon after arrival (see Table 2) while the Navajo colonists were generally reluctant to take this step. Only two had done so by 1960.

In 1964, Congressional action changed the status of the reservation in order to avoid some of the problems of definition which had plagued the

**Table 1**  
**Number of Family Groups Involved in Colonization**  
**on the Colorado River Indian Reservation**  
**(adapted from Young 1961, p. 205)**

Year	Arrivals**		Withdrawals**	
	Navajo	Hopi	Navajo	Hopi
1945	1	16	—	—
1946	—	2	—	—
1947	6	3	—	—
1948	2	2	—	3
1949	15	1	—	—
1950	60	3	—	2
1951	32	2	7	1
1952	—	—	8	—
1953	—	—	20	1
1954	—	—	5	2
1955	—	—	16	1
1956	—	—	6	—
1957	—	—	5	1
1958	—	—	1	—
1959	—	—	2	—
1960	—	—	1	—
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Totals*	116	29*	72	11*
Number remaining:	44	18		
Per cent remaining:	37.9	62.1		

\*Figures exclude one Hopi colonist for whom neither arrival nor departure dates are available, and one Hopi colonist who died at Colorado River is omitted from the column headed "withdrawals."

\*\*Does not include three Supai families who arrived in 1951. Two of the Supai families withdrew in 1955.

**Table 2**  
**Number of Hopi Adopted into the Colorado**  
**River Indian Tribe**

1947	21
1948	27
1949	18
1950	4
1956	1
1965	5
Total	76

Data provided by the Colorado River Indian Reservation Agency, Parker, Arizona.

colonization effort. The phrase pertaining to the tribes of the entire Colorado drainage was eliminated, and the new legislation required that all residents of the reservation be enrolled on tribal rolls of the Colorado River Indian Tribe by 1965, renouncing any other tribal affiliation. Most of the Hopi colonists had already been adopted into the tribe, so only a few individuals were effected by the new law. Most of the Navajo colonists were adopted into the Colorado River Indian tribe in 1965, although a few chose to return to the Navajo Reservation at that time. At present no distinction is made on the agency records of any past tribal affiliations; all are members of the Colorado River Indian Tribe. The distinction between the Northern and Southern Reserves was also abolished, although in fact the northern portion of the reservation is still Mohave and Chemehuevi while the southern portion is Hopi and Navajo.

The colonization scheme was to a great extent experimental in nature. The kind of farming practiced on the Colorado River was quite unlike the subsistence farming found on the Navajo and Hopi reservations. Initially, it was thought that 40 acre allotments were sufficient, but it soon became clear that a minimum of 80 acres was required if the farms were to be economically viable in a commercial system. Loans and technical assistance were made available, not only to the colonists, but to the Mohave and Chemehuevi residents as well. The development of the irrigation system was of course basic to the entire project.

Today the reservation is a very different place than it was twenty-five years ago. Several commercial crops are grown in the fertile alluvial soil, cotton being perhaps the most important. Fodder crops, such as alfalfa, are also of importance. Income from such crops is often supplemented by wage labor in nearby communities. Housing is substantial and often quite attractive. This has been aided by low-cost housing loans for Indians from the federal government and from the tribal council's funds.

In recent years the increasing demand for recreational facilities in the Southwest has added another element to the reservation's landscape. The tribal charter has been modified to allow long-term leases to non-Indians for trailer-parks, motels, and boat launching facilities catering to the large Southern California population (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1966,

servations. What effect did the program have on the Hopi reservation? p.13). From the standpoint of the Hopi (and Navajo) colonists who have remained, then, the colonization scheme must be viewed as a success. But it was originally proposed as a partial solution to the problems of other re-

Out of a total Hopi population of around 4,000, only about 115 persons elected to make the move to the Colorado River, about three per cent of the population. Of these, about forty eventually returned to the Hopi reservation. In light of the rapid growth of the Hopi population, this scheme was of almost no importance in solving the problems faced by the Hopi.

But the program can be looked at in another way. What kind of Hopi were involved on the colonization, and what effect did their leaving have on the population which remained behind? Most Hopi in the late 1940's were not prepared to make the kind of change in their way of life required by the move to the Colorado River. Aside from the prospect of renouncing their membership in the Hopi tribe, the move meant that the colonists were effectively cut off from the remainder of their extended families, and the entire complex of social and religious activities which are of such great importance to the Hopi. Therefore, only those Hopi who were already at least partially divorced from these activities would be likely candidates for colonization. There are no figures available on the origins of the colonists or on their religious affiliations, but there can be no doubt that a majority of the colonists were Christian, and there is evidence that a large proportion of the colonists came from First Mesa where acculturation has been most marked. Many of the names found on the Colorado River Indian Reservation are those of families at First Mesa.<sup>2</sup>

If these assumptions are correct, it means that a large proportion of the colonists came from the part of the reservation which has been most exposed to Western culture, and for a variety of reasons, had been most receptive to this influence. Those who were Christian would have suffered the least from the move, for they could continue to follow their religion anywhere, whereas the traditional Hopi religion depends to a very great extent on its followers physical presence on the mesas, and their participation in the many ceremonies.

Even though the number of colonists was relatively small, the program probably removed many possible sources of dissension from the Hopi reservation, for the people most likely to be at odds with the traditional leaders were also the most likely to become colonists. Cox (1967, p. 153) cites one case in which a family was forced to leave Polacca because a member had sold clan land, which could not be done within the traditional system. This family became colonists on the Colorado River, and is now well-established there. It seems probable that a major side effect of the colonization scheme was to lessen tensions between factions on the Hopi Reservation far out of proportion to the numbers of people involved.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1950 nineteen of the approximately eighty-eight Hopi colonists on the Colorado River were Tewa from First Mesa (Dozier 1954, p. 288).

This colonization plan must be considered as a failure if viewed as a remedy for the problem of increasing Hopi population with a limited area to exploit. It was conceived as a farming colony, and since the Hopi have traditionally been farmers, it was felt that this would be a relatively easy change to make. But the farming practiced on the Colorado River Indian Reservation is a completely different type of agriculture than the traditional type practiced by the Hopi. Therefore the move required a great change not only in location, but also in the type of activity engaged in, and the whole cycle of yearly tasks.

In addition, most of the Hopi who felt strongly about continuing to farm preferred to remain within the traditional system, on the Hopi reservation. Those who, for whatever reason, were inclined to move off the reservation were usually interested in non-agricultural employment. Many had worked at the Navajo Ordnance Depot west of Flagstaff during World War II, and the prospect of wage labor seemed more attractive to many than farming, particularly in the unfamiliar environment of the Colorado River valley.