Two mesas rise majestically out of the desert, a shield wall at the northern boundary of the Phoenix Basin. Capped with basalt from an ancient volcano, the sheer cliffs of Black Mesa and Perry Mesa soar a thousand feet above the Agua Fria River, reaching elevations as high as 4,000 feet. Black Mesa is familiar to Arizona travelers, as it carries the twin ribbons of asphalt designated as Interstate 17.

The Agua Fria National Monument straddles the Agua Fria River and contains more than 450 archaeological sites. Two-thirds of these sites, including the entire late prehistoric occupation, are concentrated at the south end on Black Mesa, and especially, Perry Mesa. Together, the mesas cover nearly 50,000 acres; however, only about 38,000 acres are included in the national monument. About one-third of Perry Mesa is located within the Cave Creek Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest.

Perry Mesa looks foreboding and inaccessible on the east side of the river. Deep, narrow canyons slash the western edge. Towering cliffs mark the northern and southern boundaries overlooking Silver Creek and Squaw Creek. Dense vegetation runs up these drainages, framing the grasslands with riparian forest.

The few who actually reach Perry Mesa find a gently undulating surface awash in a sea of bright tobosa grassland and juniper savannah. It is home to deer, antelope, mountain lions, and a few cows, but has no permanent human population. This was not always so. Well over 300 archaeological sites have been identified on Perry Mesa, situated on an essentially intact fourteenth century landscape. Seven major residential clusters, averaging about 200 rooms each, are the core of an ancient settlement system. The residential clusters, composed of multiple massed room blocks, are arrayed in defensive positions around the perimeter of the mesa, while small farmsteads and fieldhouses dot the interior.

The Perry Mesa population and cultural tradition appear to have originated from the same sources as the Hohokam of the Salt River Basin. However, the Perry Mesa inhabitants had developed their own distinctive cultural tradition by the late Classic period. Their trade, cultural influence, and alliances extended well to the east across the distant Verde River.

The earliest residents of Perry Mesa, aside from occasional Archaic hunters and gatherers, were a few pioneering Hohokam homesteaders who established several small pithouse villages on the broad, grass flats of the mesa top. By late pre-Classic times, settlement locations had shifted to the edges of the mesa. This pattern was consolidated in the early Classic period with the construction of surface masonry versions of the pithouse sites and the introduction of the modular compound site layout. These features became popular throughout the uplands between the Agua Fria and lower Verde rivers. During the late thirteenth century, a network of fortifications was built along the southern and western edges of the mesa. By the fourteenth century, the growing population had absorbed at least some of the groups who abandoned the Prescott Highlands in the late 1200s. Nearly all of these people were living in massive, multi-room, masonry structures.

After the area was abandoned near the end of the fourteenth century, it remained largely unoccupied with the exception of relatively mobile groups such as the Tonto Apache, Yavapai, and Basque sheep herders. This lack of subsequent residential occupation has left the prehistoric landscape relatively undisturbed. Consequently, Perry Mesa is a natural laboratory for archaeological research, especially for settlement pattern analysis. Additionally, the basalt cliffs are decorated with abundant rock art—pecked and painted—and the mesa top itself is covered with extensive agricultural fields interspersed with large agave roasting pits and clusters of bedrock grinding features.
Research by professionals has been limited. As early as 1955, the larger ruins were visited by university professors and their students on field trips. In the late 1960s, Peter Pilles recorded several dozen sites on the eastern side of the mesa. In the 1970s, surveys and small excavations were conducted by Prescott College and Southern Illinois University (the Central Arizona Ecotone Project) and by the Museum of Northern Arizona. In 1990, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) began a series of cooperative efforts with the United States Forest Service (USFS) to inventory, protect, and ultimately interpret, this unique area to the public. These efforts resulted in an assessment of vandalism to Perry Mesa sites, additional systematic survey, an archaeological overview, and establishment of one of the nation’s largest National Register districts.

Vandalism has been a serious problem at Perry Mesa. By the early 1960s, most of the larger ruins and their cemeteries had been looted. A second wave of vandalism in the mid- to late-1970s thrust Perry Mesa onto the national stage. In 1977, three Utah men were caught digging on USFS land. Two years later, as a direct result of the judicial circumstances of that case, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) of 1979 was passed. Those same three men pleaded to ARPA violations as an alternative to the penalties awaiting them under the theft of government property statutes. They were the first to be convicted, fined, and imprisoned under the new law.

As a result of this notoriety, Perry Mesa was soon subject to a different kind of visitation – recreational tourism. By 1985, Perry Mesa had become one of the most popular field trips for the Arizona Archaeological Society (AAS). Since 1990, tours have been conducted on the mesa on a nearly annual basis by both BLM and the USFS.

In 1997, after a Perry Mesa site tour, Jerry Robertson proposed an innovative assessment of the patterning of fourteenth century settlements. Jerry was an avid member of the Verde Valley Chapter of the AAS. Moreover, he was a veteran of the war in Vietnam who retired from the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army. Jerry drew on his military training, and he observed that the entire mesa top had been organized as an integrated defensive system that served the whole population.

We began working with Jerry to develop these ideas. A little fieldwork documented the presence of a series of defensive sites on and around Perry Mesa that could have served as a “command and control” system. They included a sophisticated early warning system that covered the entire length of Squaw Creek and extended into Bloody Basin along an ancient trail system. This evidence from Perry Mesa became the center of a controversial proposal that suggested many of the shifts in settlement patterning during the Classic period throughout central Arizona were the direct result of regional warfare. Wilcox, Robertson, and Wood published this proposal in the Summer 1999 issue of Plateau Journal.

Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Interior for the Clinton administration, happened to read that Plateau Journal article. It caught his interest, encouraging him to explore ways with the BLM to protect and preserve the ruins. A public assessment process by the BLM and USFS focused on the Perry Mesa National Register District and led to a published management assessment. Ultimately, President Clinton’s proclamation expanded the size of the national monument but was limited to lands under BLM jurisdiction. We see this as an exciting opportunity. The two agencies, working in cooperation, may be able to design complementary management strategies that would better enable each to provide a full range of recreational and research opportunities that might not be possible under a single jurisdiction. We need to ensure that both agencies receive the funding and staffing resources necessary to protect, preserve, and interpret these important and significant sites and their equally fascinating setting.