

A WORD ABOUT MAKING ANCIENT AMERICAN INDIAN TEXTILES

Textiles are a special kind of artifact. They are a window into the past and a direct link to long-ago people. Archaeologists estimate that 90% of past material culture was made from *perishables* — items that decay over time — including different kinds of textiles. For this reason, textile artifacts are very rare but offer unique information about daily life.

Learning how to make a textile was a very important skill for the ancient Native peoples. A child would have been able to gather plants and spin fibers. An eight-year-old would have been able to weave basic textiles like bags and baskets. Weavers learned the technologies specific to their family and culture. Their decisions, their mistakes, and the steps in the manufacturing process are all reflected in textile artifacts.

STEP 1 – Gathering and Fiber Preparation

Native craftspeople knew which plants produced the best fibers for the object they wanted to make. They gathered the stems and leaves in the late fall or early spring. In Kentucky, the fiber for textiles commonly came from the leaves of rattlesnake master and from the stems of milkweed, dogbane, and stinging nettle. Stem fiber is called *bast* fiber.

Fiber processing depended on the type of textile the weaver planned to make. Hard-wearing objects, like some sandals and slippers, required plants that were only minimally processed. But fine, soft fabric for wearing against the skin required painstakingly processed fiber.

First, the weaver peeled away the tough outer layers of the plant and any hard, woody bits. Then using a hard rock, he or she pounded the resulting fiber strands to remove any rough spots and to soften the fibers. The more time spent processing the fibers, the smoother and softer the final textile would be.



Above: An approximately 2,000-year-old bundle of bast fiber from McCreary County. **Below left:** Spinning plant fibers against the thigh.

STEP 2 – Making Yarns

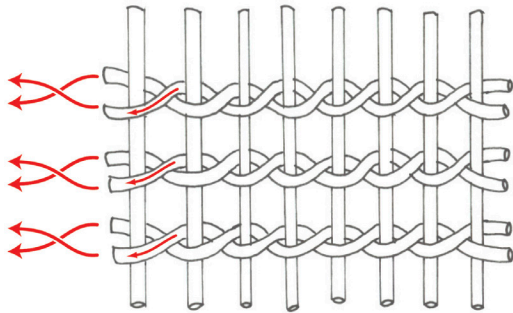
The processed fibers could be used as-is or spun into *cordage* (string) or yarn. Kentucky's ancient Native peoples did not have spinning wheels. They spun their fibers into yarn by hand or against the thigh. Due to the preservation of very fine yarns, researchers think that Native weavers also may have used *spindles* (a slender rounded wooden rod with tapered ends used in spinning), even though archaeologists have never found any wooden rods.

Even without the help of tools like spindles, ancient Native peoples made yarns that were as fine as anything weavers elsewhere in the world made. For example, in the early 1500s, when Hernando de Soto and his men saw what the Native peoples in the Southeastern United States were wearing, they thought the Native-made fabrics were as fine as anything they had seen in Spain.



Native weavers made yarn by twisting fiber to the left (*Z spun*) or to the right (*S spun*). They then could twist it together again to make *plied yarn*. Plied yarns are usually twisted in the opposite direction from how the weavers initially spun them. The opposing twists ‘lock’ the yarns together, which prevents unraveling and makes stronger string.

From their elders, weavers learned their peoples’ spinning and weaving traditions. In turn, they taught these traditions to their children. Over time, weavers in a whole community made their textiles the same way, such that theirs looked different from their neighbors’ textiles. Details like twist direction can tell us something about the people who made the yarn. Archaeologists use differences in textile traditions (like twist direction) to explore where groups moved over time and how different groups interacted.



Above: The pattern of S-twist twining.

Step 3 – Making Textiles

Kentucky’s ancient Native weavers did not have looms. They wove many different kinds of textiles — everything from heavy-duty bags to fancy lace shawls — with only a wooden frame. However, they wove most of their textiles — including baskets, cane mats, and slippers — without any frame or support.

Kentucky’s Native peoples used two different weaves. *Twining* is the much older technique. In twining, two yarns are twisted together around a third perpendicular yarn. By using colored yarns — which Native peoples dyed or painted with natural pigments like those from sumac and walnuts — and by changing how they twisted the yarns together, Native weavers created complex patterns and designs in their twined textiles.

In *plaiting*, yarns pass over and under each other. Weavers created *twill patterns* by changing how many times they passed a yarn over or under another yarn. Twill patterns are thousands of years old. They are one of the most common weaves today, as in the denim used to make jeans.



Above: Teaching children an ancient weaving method – twining – at Living Archaeology Weekend.

Right: Fragment of a 3000-year-old woven textile from Menifee County that may be from practicing weaving.

Busy Weavers

Using very simple technology, Native weavers made a startling diverse array of textiles, which they then made into a host of other items used in daily life — slippers, shawls, blankets, baskets, bags, nets, and mats. Textiles kept people warm, helped them explore caves and rockshelters, and made moving around and across the landscape much easier. Very complex and highly valued textiles announced a person’s social status or his/her role as a religious leader. Taken together, textiles hold important stories about our past.



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