

# A WORD ABOUT ANCIENT AMERICAN INDIAN TEXTILE INDUSTRIES



When you imagine ancient Native peoples' clothing, what immediately comes to mind? Animal skins? If so, you are partly right. Leather and tanned hides were part of ancient wardrobes.

But Native peoples also wore beautiful, colorful, and functional clothing made from the textiles they wove out of locally available plants.

## What is a Textile?

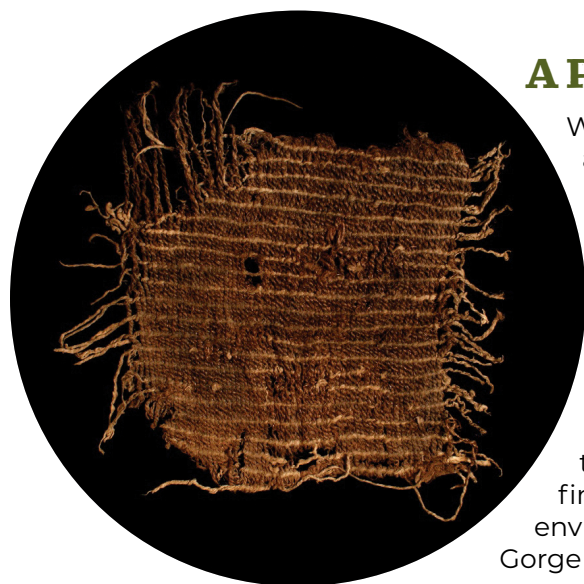
A *textile* is something woven. Baskets, mats, slippers, nets, and fabrics — they are all types of textiles. Native peoples used textiles in all aspects of their daily lives.

Fibrous plants served as the raw material for Native textiles. Milkweed, rattlesnake master, stinging nettle, and dogbane are among the most common plants that Native peoples processed to make fibers for weaving textiles. Colorful bird feathers and soft animal fur were elements, too. From the earliest hunter-gatherers to the most recent Native farmers, they all made and used textiles.

Today, we make textiles mainly from cotton and animal fiber like wool. It was not until after Europeans arrived that Kentucky's Native peoples used those fibers in textile production.



*Above: Close-up of a 3,000-year old plaited band from a Menifee County rockshelter site, possibly a strap, that had been painted red with ocher. Below left: Fibers from two different plants were used to create stripes in this 2,000-year-old twined textile fragment from a Menifee County rockshelter site.*



## A Perishable Technology

Why haven't archaeologists found as many textile remains as pottery sherds or arrowheads at Native campsites and villages? Because textiles are made from *perishable* materials – ones that do not typically preserve once buried in the ground. Unburned wood and animal skins and ligaments are other kinds of perishable materials.

Archaeologists think that as much as 90% of ancient peoples' technologies – houses, bedding, clothing, nets, containers, and other everyday objects like string and toys – were made of perishable materials. Archaeologists find perishable remains like textiles only in very stable environments, like the dry rockshelters of the Red River Gorge or dry caves like Mammoth Cave.

## What Can Textiles Tell Us About People?

The textiles Native peoples made and used tell us a lot about who they were and what they did. We know some were cavers because we find their tightly twined slippers deep in caves. They carried heavy loads in large sacks that they reused over and over again, as revealed by the many mended spots.



*Slippers were the perfect footwear for exploring Kentucky's caves and rockshelters. This 2,500-year-old slipper is from a site in Edmonson County.*

Delicate shawls woven so fine that they could fit through a button hole tell us that Native peoples were expert spinners and weavers who created valuable items used for special occasions. And just like today, the clothing people wore 2,000 years ago reflected a lot about the wearer: rich or poor, fashionable or traditional.

Textiles are important. Studying textiles provides a special snapshot that archaeologists can use to help them recreate a larger, fuller, and richer picture of daily life in the past. The archaeological sites where textiles are preserved are very important!

## What do you imagine when you think about the clothing worn by Kentucky's ancient Native peoples?

*Teaching children an ancient weaving method - twining - at Living Archaeology Weekend.*



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