

## A Word About Making Native American Textiles

Textiles are a special kind of artifact. They are a window into the past and a direct link to long-ago people. Archaeologists believe 90% of past material culture was made from perishables, much of which were different kinds of textiles.

Learning how to make a textile was a very important skill for Native peoples. Children as young as three or four years old began with learning how to gather plants and spin fibers. An eight-year-old would be able to weave basic textiles like bags and baskets. They learned the technologies specific to their family and culture, and they taught *their* children. Every step in the manufacturing process is there to see: all the weaver's decisions (and all the mistakes), even if they were made 2,000 years ago!

### Step 1 – Gathering and Fiber Preparation

Native craftspeople knew which plants produced the best fibers. They gathered the stems and leaves in the late fall or early spring. In Kentucky, these plants included milkweed, dogbane, rattlesnake master, and stinging nettle. The fibrous material obtained from these plants and used for making textiles is called *bast*.



*A prehistoric bundle of 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.

### 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 postulate that they also may have used *spindles* (a slender rounded wooden rod with tapered ends used in spinning), despite the fact that 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, Hernando de Soto and his men, when they saw what the Native peoples in the Southeastern United States were wearing in the early 1500s, thought the Native-made fabrics were as fine as anything they had seen in Spain.

*Spinning fibers against the thigh.*



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. As the yarns try to unravel, the opposing twists 'lock' the yarns together, making stronger string.

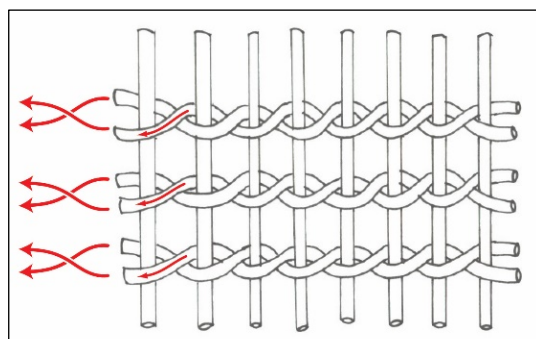
From their elders, weavers learned a tradition of twisting yarn in one direction, and they taught this tradition to their children. Over time, weavers in a whole community made their yarn the same way, and it looked different from a neighboring community's yarn. Thus, twist direction can tell us something about the people who made the yarn. Archaeologists use differences in twist traditions to explore where groups moved over time and how different groups interacted.

### Step 3 – Making Textiles

Kentucky's ancient Native weavers did not have looms. They wove many different kinds of textiles – everything from heavy-duty sacks to fancy lace shawls – with only a frame. They wove most of their textiles, however, without any frame or support. These included baskets, cane mats, and slippers.

Native peoples used two different weaves. *Twining* is the much older technique. In twining, two yarns are twisted together around a third perpendicular yarn. Ancient weavers twined everything from delicate shawls to durable sacks and heavy-weight sandals. By using colored yarns – which Native peoples dyed or painted with natural pigments like those from sumac and walnuts – and changing how they twisted the yarns together, Native weavers created complex patterns and designs in their twined textiles.

*The pattern of S-twist twining.*



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 today to make jeans.



### Busy Weavers

Using very simple technology, Native weavers made a startling diverse array of textiles, which they then fashioned into a host of other items used in daily life – slippers, shawls, blankets, baskets, bags, nets, mats, and cordage. Textiles kept people warm, helped them explore, and made moving around 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.

*Fragment of ancient woven textile that may be from practicing weaving.*

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