
Lesson 4.4

POTTERY TRADITIONS

Subjects: science, social studies, language arts, visual arts.

Skills: comprehension, synthesis, knowledge.

Strategies: discussion, analogy, writing, observation, compare and contrast, classification, invention.

Duration: 60 minutes.

Class Size: any.



Pottery fragments from Stanly County,
North Carolina, 1000–500 BC.

Objectives

In this exercise, students will:

- learn how Indian people of North Carolina made and used coiled pottery;
- summarize why archaeologists study pottery;
- make and decorate a replica of a North Carolina coiled pot.

Materials

For the teacher, transparencies of “North Carolina Pottery,” “Pottery Making Tips,” and “Pottery Surface Treatments” for projection. For each student, clay. Try to find clay that will harden without firing unless your school has a kiln. An assortment of pencils or popsicle sticks wrapped in string, plastic drinking straws, scraps of fabric with large weave patterns, such as burlap, plastic onion bags, dried corncobs, small smooth stones, toothpicks, or paper clips.

Vocabulary

Chronological: pertaining to chronology, which is an arrangement of events or periods in the order in which they occurred.

Potter: someone who makes pottery.

Pottery: a ceramic item or material made of fired clay, usually in the form of a vessel.

Sherd: a broken piece of pottery; a shard.

Surface treatment: the way the outside surface of a pottery vessel has been finished by the potter.

On ancient Native American pottery from North Carolina, surface treatments typically consisted of stamped or impressed designs made by cordage, nets, fabric, or carved wooden paddles pressed into a vessel’s surface while the clay was still wet.

Temper: material, such as sand or crushed shell, mixed with clay to make pottery stronger and to reduce the risk of it breaking.

Vessel: a hollow or concave utensil for holding something.

Background

Pottery is common in North Carolina archaeological sites dating after 1000 BC. Its rather abrupt appearance about then signals the start of the Woodland Period, the era when people began living in semi-permanent villages and cultivating gardens of seed plants to supplement

food obtained by hunting and gathering. During the Woodland, which lasted until AD 1000, people used pottery for storing food and water, and for cooking.

Today, archaeologists can learn a great deal about the life of North Carolina's Woodland people by studying the pottery they left behind. For instance, archaeologists use pottery styles as a tool to study relationships among the different groups of Indian people living in North Carolina then. Archaeologists also study how pottery styles changed to learn about such things as diet and cooking techniques of earlier peoples.

To archaeologists, pottery is an important artifact because it can often indicate how old a site is. When fired, clay is very durable and is preserved long after organic materials decay. Because of its durability, pottery pieces (*sherds*), along with stone tools, make up much of what archaeologists recover from Woodland period sites. Because Woodland groups changed pottery styles and production techniques over time, pottery is a useful *chronological* marker. Also, because pottery styles are distinctive to particular groups of people, they can serve as cultural markers. Native cultures living in the three regions of North Carolina—the Coastal Plain, the Piedmont, and the Mountains—during the Woodland were not the same. Their pottery styles and pottery making traditions varied.

Pottery is made from clay that is dug from the ground. Clay that was good for making pottery can be found in almost every part of North Carolina. To make pottery, Native Americans first had to dig the clay and then pound it to make sure there were not any big lumps in it. They mixed the clay with water to make it a putty with play-dough like consistency so they could shape it into bowls and other pottery *vessels*. To make a piece of pottery, the *potter* would first shape the bottom of the vessel from long coils or ropes of clay, and then add other coils to build the sides of the pot.

After the pottery vessel was shaped, the potter would smooth the inside and outside surfaces with his or her fingers, or a piece of shell or stone. Smoothing the pottery helped hold the coils together. Usually, the potter would then add patterns or designs to the outside of the pot. Archaeologists call this *surface treatment*. The pot was set out to dry. The next step was placing it in a fire. Burnable materials, such as bark or wood, were placed around the pot, which was left in the hot fire until the clay became hard.

Most vessels North Carolina Indians crafted were used for cooking. Typically, foods were boiled by placing the pot directly over a fire. Thus, cooking pots were usually deep bowls or jars. The latter had pointed bases which could be placed upright in deep ash. Shallower bowls were also sometimes made; these were used for serving food. The specific shapes changed from one period to another. Hence, archaeologists can use vessel shapes to help date the pottery they find.

Surface treatment is also an important element used by archaeologists for dating pottery. In the coastal areas of North Carolina, early Woodland people sometimes wrapped a paddle with cord and pressed the paddle against the unfired clay pot. Pots decorated in this way are called cord-marked. Fishing nets were also pressed against the surface of pots to create a criss-crossed pattern. In later times, people cut or incised lines into the pottery, or stamped it with carved wooden paddles. Sometimes dried corncobs and fabric were used to impress designs on pottery. Late Woodland coastal peoples often polished the outside of the pot with a smooth stone, and this is called a burnished finish. Pottery from other parts of the state have different types of decoration.

In addition to variation in shape and surface treatment, pottery vessels often differ in *temper*. Temper is material that was mixed with clay to make the finished pottery stronger and less likely to crack during firing. Sand, crushed shell, bits of fired clay, and small pebbles have all been used as tempering materials in North Carolina pottery. Archaeologists have found that looking at

temper type is another good way to date pottery.

Setting the Stage

Project the transparency “North Carolina Pottery,” which shows three kinds of pottery North Carolina Indians made during Woodland times. Ask the students what they observe about differences in vessel shapes and surface decoration.

Procedure

1. Share the background information with the students.
2. Distribute a piece of clay to each student.
3. Project the transparency “Pottery Making Tips” and go over steps in making coiled pottery with the students. Give students time to complete their pots.
4. Project the transparency “Pottery Surface Treatments” so that students can see the different types of surface treatment used on ancient pottery from the North Carolina Coastal Plain. Distribute the string-wrapped pencils, corncobs, onion bags, drinking straws, fabric, paper clips, and stones for creating surface treatments. Allow students time to decorate their own vessels.
5. If your school has a kiln, fire the pots.

Closure

Summarize the reasons why archaeologists study pottery and the value the study of pottery has for identifying sites.

Evaluation

The students turn in their pottery for evaluation.

Extensions

Have a Native American potter come to class to show students how he or she makes pots today.

Links

Lesson 2.3: “Artifact Classification.”

Lesson 2.8: “Mending Pottery.”

Sources

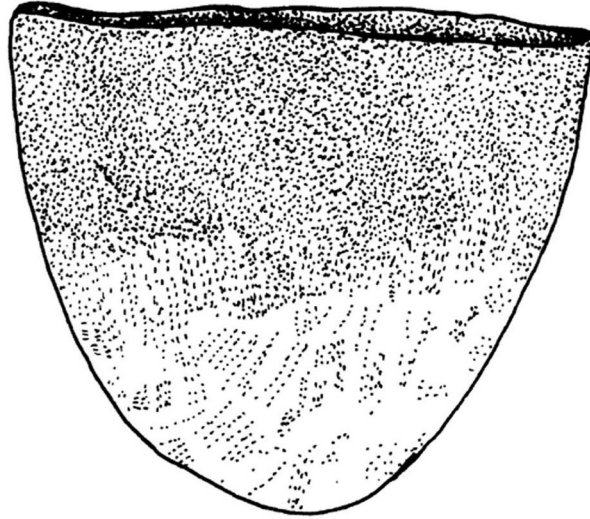
Phelps, David Sutton. 1989. “Ancient Pots and Dugout Canoes: Indian Life as Revealed by Archaeology at Lake Phelps.” Pamphlet. Creswell, N.C.: Pettigrew State Park.

Ward, H. Trawick, and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. 1999. *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. [The image in this lesson’s main heading is taken from Figure 4.2.]

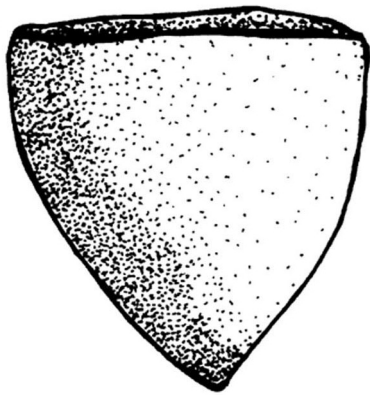
Weiss, Harvey. 1964. *Ceramics: From Clay to Kiln*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley.

Wetmore, Ruth Y. 1975. *First on the Land: The North Carolina Indians*. Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair.

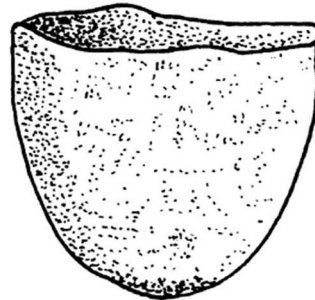
North Carolina Pottery



Deep Creek Cord Marked

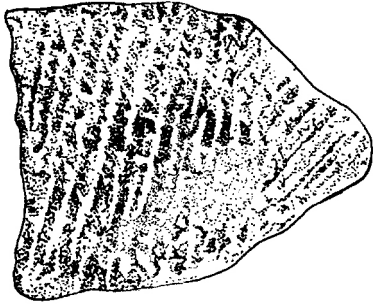


Mount Pleasant Ware

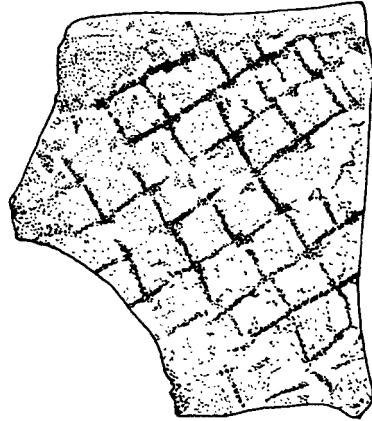


Colington Ware

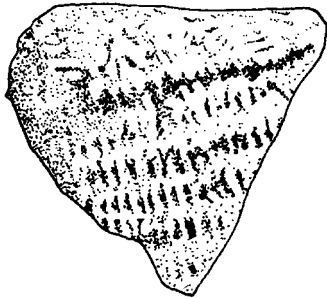
Pottery Surface Treatments



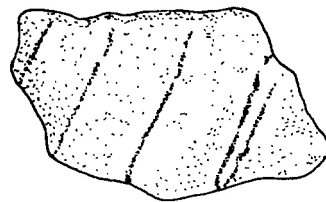
Cord Marked



Net Impressed



Fabric Impressed

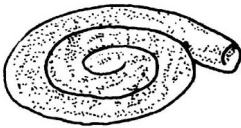


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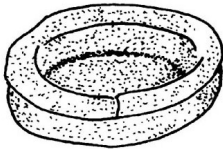
Pottery-Making Tips



Roll a piece of clay into a long coil about 12 inches long and as thick as your finger. Make ten or so of these coils and cover them with a damp paper towel.



Using one coil, create the bottom of your pottery vessel by spiraling it around itself on a flat surface. Join the clay strips by pressing firmly and smoothing with your fingers. Turn the clay spiral over and repeat the joining process on the opposite side.



Build up the sides of your vessel by placing a coil along the outer edge of the base. Press it into place and smooth with your fingers on both the inside and the outside. When you have made a complete circle of clay around the base of the vessel, cut off the excess clay and join the two ends.



Repeat this process with the other coils until your vessel is the size you want it to be. To make a curve in your vessel's profile, you will need to vary the size of your circles. If the circles are larger, the vessel will spread out; if they are smaller, it will become narrow.



Finish your vessel by smoothing it inside and outside. Add surface treatment or decoration if desired.